

The Sunday within the Octave of All Saints, 5 November 2017
Saint Ignatius of Antioch Episcopal Church in the City of New York

O Almighty God, who hast knit together thine elect in one communion and fellowship in the mystical body of thy Son Christ our Lord: Give us grace so to follow thy blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living, that we may come to those ineffable joys which thou hast prepared for those who unfeignedly love thee; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord, who with thee and the Holy Spirit liveth and reigneth, one God, in glory everlasting. *Amen.*

Ecclesiasticus 44:1-10, 13-14

Psalm 149

Revelation 7:2-4, 9-17

Matthew 5:1-12

I have always been moved by the image of Paradise in the Revelation to St. John:

I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night within his temple; and he who sits upon the throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water; and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Before the Lamb and for us to see are gathered all those who have conformed their wills with God’s will, who have been steadfast in their relationship with God (which is

to say, steadfast in their faith), spreading God's Love throughout creation, sometimes—often, even—at great personal risk. These are the ones who have so loved God—as God so loved the world—that they shone God's light forth for all to see. This gathering is filled with joy. The trials and hardships they faced as they remained resolute in their love are now behind them. As a token, a pledge, a sacrament of this new life, the Lamb gently touches each and wipes away all their tears.

Who, then is this caring Lamb around whom they are gathered, the one who both consoles and leads them? Yes, it is a symbol of purity, of obedience, of gentleness and mildness, of one who knows how to follow, but who will only follow the one he knows to be the true shepherd. More than that, however, this is the Lamb who is also the Shepherd, the one who calls us each by name and who goes after each of us when we become lost. This is the Lamb who was led to the slaughter at the hands of cruel and ignorant men. The Lamb who came through the ordeal not hating those who persecuted him, but loving them all the more. The Lamb who was himself so transformed, transfigured by Love that death itself was defeated.

Indeed, it is the blood of the Lamb, shed for us so that we may be united with God in that sacrifice, that has brought the saints before the throne. It is the Lamb's supreme example of love that has inspired, energised, and, yes, transformed the saints. It is the blood of the Lamb that has washed them and made them clean and spotless, and it is the Lamb who gives them life with living water.

And, in turn we may ask, who are these saints? Who are these who gather before

the throne to worship and adore and love and serve not a Lord who selfishly oppresses with his power, but the Lord who is both our Shepherd and the Lamb? The Saints, we are told, are from “every tribe and people and nation and tongue.” They are people of all sorts included with no regard for wealth or education, for gender or sexuality, for race or nationality, as the capacity for love knows no human-defined boundary, but extends itself to all of us [, in short, as William has taken to saying, we all taste like chicken]. Different as they are one from the other, each with unique gifts and talents and skills, each has loved with the Love of God—the love of which I have spoken many time, that cares of the other for their own sake and not our own, the love can give us the strength to look at another creature and say, “I am so very glad that you exist.”

Each and every one of us from all walks and conditions of life, is worthy to be counted among these saints. As diverse a collection as we are, each and every human being, each and every one of us has been created in the Image and Likeness of God. Each of us, then, has within ourselves, been given a special gift, the capacity to respond in love to the transforming, self-giving Love of the Lamb.

Sainthood is not about being the biggest, the strongest, richest, most powerful person. It is about being a creature who can—in and through our own complex human lives—confirm our will with God’s will. Indeed, throughout the Middle Ages, which was the height of the Cult of the Saints, people’s favourite saints were not the superheros, but rather the ones who seemed most human, most flawed, and were still used by God as bearers and doers of his will.

They loved St. Peter because even though he denied Jesus at the moment of his Passion, even though when Jesus seemed to have needed him the most, he was nowhere to be found, Peter was still the rock upon whom Jesus founded his Church, the one who brought the faith to the heart of the Roman Empire. After the Resurrection, Peter found within himself the strength to be the great preacher of, and witness to Jesus' life, death, and resurrection even unto his own death. God did not despise Peter for his earlier failings. Rather Peter found God's forgiveness, found God's arms open and waiting for him to return.

Mary Magdalene, too, was a favourite of Medieval English Christians. Although nowhere in scripture is she ever described as a prostitute, this legend arose—for better or worse—to humanise her, to make her more accessible to people who themselves felt their own lives to be less than perfect. She represented for people the one who, out of the complex circumstances of her own life, found God ready to receive her in love and who could become a devoted disciple of Christ.

Human life is complicated. Each of us has our own flaws, our weaknesses. We are not always up to the tasks we are set. We are not always up to the serious business of loving God and our neighbour. Nevertheless, we remain always ready and always worthy to be set apart to do God's work. Created in God's Image and Likeness, and having been led by the Lamb to the living waters of Baptism into his death and Resurrection, we are already Holy, "set apart" to do the work of ministry to which we are called. All of us have within us the power to answer God's call because God, out of

Love for us, gave us this power in the first place.

The Saints who stand and serve at the throne of the Lamb are set today before us not as examples of virtue so unattainable as to make us feel inadequate to our call to ministry. They are before us, rather, as human beings who, in the complex circumstances of their lives met God who, with outstretched arms, invited them into a loving embrace and who in turn shared that embrace with others.

I pray that we may all know the loving embrace of the one who created us, know the touch of the Lamb on our face as God wipes away our tears, and that we may share this with others who will feel in us, the presence of God.

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New York City
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